

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Division of Consumer & Business Education

Weathering the High Cost of Heating Your Home

Whether you heat your home with oil, natural gas or electricity, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, has tips to help you save money and stay warm this winter. The FTC enforces the Appliance Labeling Rule, which requires EnergyGuide labels on certain appliances, including furnaces, boilers and heat pumps. The label lets you know how energy efficient a model is compared to others like it.

- Get a *home energy audit*. It looks at how energy efficient your heating system is and where energy is being wasted. A professional can recommend fixes. Your utility company may offer free or low-cost energy audits, or it may be able to recommend local companies or organizations to do it. Or check with your state or local government energy or weatherization office. A professional audit can cost between \$300 and \$800. Before you hire a professional, get several references and check out the company with the Better Business Bureau or reputable online rating services. Ask whether the auditor uses a calibrated blower door and does thermographic inspections, or contracts with another company to do that.

Another option is to be your own energy auditor. For an idea of what to look for, visit the Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE) at energysavers.gov, or use the online audit tool at hes.lbl.gov. A walk-through might help you spot problems that, if fixed, could save you money. For example, you could:

- Check your attic, attic stairway, attached garage walls, basement, ceilings, floors and crawl spaces to make sure your home is insulated to DOE-recommended levels.
- Wrap an under-insulated water heater in an insulating jacket or blanket. A water heater needs extra insulation if it's warm to the touch.
- Schedule an annual tune-up for your heat pump, furnace or boiler. Expect to pay between \$50 and \$200. Your utility company may offer this service.

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- Check ducts for holes and gaps where sections have separated and air may be leaking. Minor repairs often can be done with “heat-approved” tape. Or, hire a professional who can seal and insulate ducts and ensure your airflow distribution system is working efficiently.
 - Clean or replace filters on forced-air furnaces and heat pumps, and vacuum air vents, baseboard heaters and radiators regularly.
 - Seal flues in fireplaces you don't use. In those you do, close dampers when you don't have a fire going.
 - Install a programmable thermostat to lower the temperature at night or while you're away.
 - Use caulking or weatherstripping to seal air leaks around windows and doors, and holes around plumbing and heating pipes. Check existing caulking and weatherstripping for gaps or cracks.
 - If there's a crawl space under your home, close your foundation vents for the winter.
 - Close the doors to rooms that you don't use regularly.
 - Prune shrubs that may block airflow to your heat pump.
 - When you shop for a new furnace, boiler, heat pump, water heater or other home appliance, consider getting a high-efficiency model. Although some energy efficient appliances cost more than other models, their lower operating costs could save you money in the long run. Retailers and contractors selling heating systems are required to let you know about a product's energy use and energy efficiency before you buy — generally, through a website, fact sheet, brochure or directory. If a seller hasn't pointed out this information, be sure to ask about it. Manufacturers must provide it on EnergyGuide labels attached to the product. The Energy Star logo also helps identify high-efficiency appliances.
 - Shop around for the best prices on oil. If you live in an area that lets you choose your natural gas provider, shop for the best price on gas.
 - Ask your utility or oil company about a budget billing plan to even out your monthly costs and protect your budget from unexpected price increases. The company takes the amount of energy you use during one year and divides it into equal monthly payments. At the end of the season, you pay any outstanding balance or your provider credits an overpayment to your next monthly bill. There also may be adjustments during the year.

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- If you're on a fixed income and have trouble paying your utility bills, contact your utility company. They, or your state or local government, may have energy assistance plans to help you pay your heating bills.

Don't Get Burned

When energy prices go up, so does advertising for a host of energy-saving products and services — some legitimate, but others overpriced or just plain bogus. Be wary of devices, gadgets and energy-saving products that promise drastic reductions in home cooling costs or extreme energy savings. Try to get independent information to verify a product's performance claims.

Be wary of uninvited door-to-door sales calls and stop anyone making a high-pressure sales pitch for furnaces, windows, roofing, siding or other home improvement products. To make sure a contractor is licensed and reputable, ask friends and neighbors for referrals, ask the contractor for customer references, and check out potential contractors with online rating services, the Better Business Bureau, state and local consumer protection officials, and your state licensing agency. The Cooling-Off Rule gives you three business days to cancel a contract if you sign it in your home or at a location other than the contractor's permanent place of business.

For More Information

Read the FTC's *Home Insulation Basics: Higher R-Values = Higher Insulating Values* and *Heating and Cooling Your Home* and visit energysavers.gov to learn more.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure online database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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